DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 090 581 CS 201 267

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TITLE Black Literature vs. Black Studies: Three Lynchings.
PUB DATE Apr 74
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting and Conference of the College English Association (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, April 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Aesthetic Education; *English Instruction; Literary Styles; *Literature Appreciation; *Negro Literature; Poetry; Social Problems; Undergraduate Study

ABSTRACT

When studying Afro-American literature, even in an English class rather than Black Studies class, both student interest and the topic tend to lead discussion toward sociological, not literary, aspects. However, the teacher should emphasize repeatedly the aesthetic dimensions of an artistic work as well as the various literary forms in which a social event or problem may be expressed. As an example, this paper discusses three different treatments of lynchings. In one, Leslie Pinckney Hill presents a restrained, quiet attack on the corruption represented by such murder in the form of a traditional Italian sonnet. In another, Claude McKay, also writing in formal sonnet form, and prophesying a bleak future, raises questions of irony and paradox in his poetic creation. Richard Wright dramatizes the violent act in a short story, allowing the reader to sense the scene by limiting what he reveals. Literary study should never stress subject matter at the expense of literary manner. (JM)ow

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BLACK LITERATURE vs. BLACK STUDIES: Three Lynchings

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According to Nick Aaron Ford[1] a reader should judge Afro-American literature according to its "significant human experience," its "cultural and racial significance," and its "relevance," as well as according to esthetic standards. And he is right to make his criteria so inclusive, right to repudiate "the overwhelming insistence upon aestheticism as the major criterion." Yet even when the works of black authors are studied in an English class (as distinct from a Black Studies class), many times the pressures of both student interest and literary subject matter will insistently force the balance toward the sociological rather than the literary. One African writer explains his own creative practice "Whenever you write prose or poetry or drama you are writing a social criticism of one kind or another. If you don't you are completely irrelevant--you don't count."[2]

A class may be reading a slave narrative by Gustavus Vassa or a story by Richard Wright, a play by Lorraine Hansberry or a poem by Nikki Giovanni. But whatever the work to be discussed, even the

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most esthetically sensitive students are likely to look at it first as a social document. To put it metaphorically, the literature is a window through which they will look at an age and a problem and perhaps also a personality. The notion of style then may be regarded as either a flaw or a decoration in the window--visible, but of little importance in itself. This attitude is convincingly asserted by Clarence Major, who maintains that "all excellent art is social; the proper movement of human art is to shatter illusions and make concrete the most explicit and useful reality."[3]

Now to be sure, one would hardly want to propose a standard of art for art's sake in the study of any literature today, whether black or not. Yet early in even an introductory course a teacher needs to acquaint his students with the esthetic dimension of their reading, and he will have to bring them back to it again and again as their study continues. One effective approach is to choose a subject which meets all the sociological criteria to begin with--it must be significant racially, culturally, and humanly. It will doubtless also be relevant for these very reasons.

Such a subject is lynching, a practice which was distinctively American and which is identified with a particular era in our national history, a lawlessness whose victims were almost always black and whose perpetrators almost always white. But lynching itself is only the <u>what</u>. Students of literature also need to see the <u>how</u>, and a teacher can make available to them accounts in many forms. There are newspaper accounts that sometimes tell as much about the attitude

of the paper and its readers as about the facts of the case itself. There are first-person accounts by witnesses, both the supporters of the act and the black community who were its victims. There are poetic accounts, presented in varying degrees of specificity, in many different verse forms, and from the perspectives of many different speakers. And there are also fictional treatments, embedded in plots whose conflicts and whose characters are developed at greater length.[4] Of the very many possibilities, let us consider just three.

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One of the simplest is a little-known poem by Leslie Pinckney Hill called "So Quietly."[5] The title refers to a news item from the New York Times which records a lynching at Smithville, Georgia in 1919, an abduction which happened so quickly that, it was reported, no one aboard the train even knew that the victim had been snatched away until the train was out of town.

So quietly they stole upon their prey
And dragged him out to death, so without flaw
Their black design, that they to whom the law
Gave him in keeping, in the broad, bright day,
Were not aware when he was snatched away;
And when the people, with a shrinking awe,
The horror of that mangled body saw,
"By unknown hands!" was all that they could say.

So, too, my country, stealeth on apace
The soul-blight of a nation. Not with drums
Or trumpet blare is that corruption sown,
But quietly--now in the open face
Of day, now in the dark--and when it comes,
Stern truth will never write, "By hands unknown."

Notice that the speaker recalls the case with an ironic quietness of his own, first telling of the "black design" of the white lynchers and describing the murdered victim only generally as "the horror of that mangled body." The poem turns out to be about something more than just that single vicious act, however. The transition "so, too" links the "soul-blight of a nation" in a present-tense parallel to the historical event. Like the lynching, this blight is also presented in only general terms: it is merely "corruption," nothing more precise. One who recognizes in the language an allusion to St. Paul's New Testament proclamation will recall the force of his ancient prophesy: that although men sow corruption, "the dead shall be raised incorruptible" (I Cor. 15.52). But the speaker in the poem is much less forceful than this. His pose is a quiet one in which he concludes that when the corruption symbolized in the lynchings matures and is ready for the harvest, "stern truth will never write, 'By hands unknown.'" What will it write, though? He does not say. His threat is only implied.

It may seem strange to observe that this muted attack is presented in the form of an Italian sonnet which rhymes abbaabba, cdecde, with the poem divided into two stanzas. Is it too traditional? Too western? Too controlled? It meets exactly the qualifications which Thrall, Hibbard, and Holman cite in their Handbook to Literature: "The octave bears the burden; a doubt, a problem, a reflection, a query, an historical statement, a cry of indignation or desire, a vision of the ideal. The sestet eases the load, resolves the problem or doubt, answers the query, solaces the yearning, realizes the vision."[6] Perhaps one can complain at its use of a sterile poetic convention, yet its style does suit the tone of restraint and even the title of quietness. Further, it sustains the appeal of the poem to "my country." The speaker is still a part of its historic values in spite of everything.

Among many other questions one might raise about the poem, certainly it is important for a class to inquire about the sort of audience for which it was intended. For unless it is only the lyrical cry of a painful soul, it must have been directed originally toward some group of potential readers. Are they white rather than black, for instance? Yes, probably, for blacks as a group have known all too much about such lynchings. Nothing in the poem adds to their factual awareness, for it provides little that is specific beyond a headnote that identifies the date and location of this horror. And emotionally it does nothing to assure them that victory--or even vengeance--is near at hand. One can merely hope. A white audience, however, might be impressed with the situation itself as a type of

abuse which blacks suffered at the hands of whites and which for decades powerful white-owned newspapers reported to their readers in the most objective terms. Would a desired effect of the poem then be a combination of both increased awareness and guilt?

Finally, a class might also want to read a remark of James Baldwin's as a gloss on the poem and then to consider its implications both for this author and for all black artists. "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious," he maintains, "is to be in a rage almost all the time. So that the first problem is how to control that rage so that it won't destroy you."[7]

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This is not the only sonnet about a lynching, however. Claude McKay has also written such a poem, his called simply "The Lynching":

His spirit in smoke ascended to high heaven.
His father, by the cruelest way of pain,
Had bidden him to his bosom once again;
The awful sin remained still unforgiven.
All night a bright and solitary star
(Perchance the one that ever guided him,
Yet gave him up at last to Fate's wild whim)
Hung pitifully o'er the swinging char.

Day dawned, and soon the mixed crowds came to view
The ghastly body swaying in the sun:
The women thronged to look, but never a one
Showed sorrow in her eyes of steely blue;

And little lads, lynchers that were to be,
Danced around the dreadful thing in fiendish glee.[8]

This is not about how "they" dragged out their "prey" to be "mangled," nor is it an excuse to castigate--however quietly--the country from whose ranks the guilty lynchers came. No, McKay begins instead on a spiritual note, and he concludes with "the ghastly body still swinging in the sun." In spite of the violence of the act of lynching itself, however, the language and form of this poem are again quiet and traditional and formal. Without a break into a separate stanza until the final couplet, this sonnet rhymes abbacddceffe, gg. The first quatrain describes the rising of the victim's spirit to heaven, the second the bright but pitiful star at night, and the third the crowd who arrive with the light of day. Like Hill's poem this one ends with a prophesy, but the future this time is seen as bleak. In a final couplet the speaker describes sons who are learning at the knees of their blue-eyed mothers to mature into "lynchers that were to be."

Beyond such surface observations, one might also ask if it matters that in the couplet three words are linked together through alliteration: little, lads, and lynchers? It could be mere accident,

some students would be bound to argue. Yet whatever the cause, the words which make up the phrase are unevenly linked. To be a "little lad" is not only to be at an innocent age; the language itself is romantically poetic. An American does not write or speak of "lads" very often in any context. But then for these lads to become "lynchers" is abruptly to change romance back to brutal reality. Furthermore, to have the youngsters in the company of blue-eyed women is to compound the paradox, for these women are not described for their attractiveness or innocence or motherly warmth. On the contrary, it is just these qualities which they must lack by being on the scene at all. Their eyes are cold and "steely blue."

Once a reader has begun to think of the irony or paradox of the poem, perhaps he will want to ask if McKay's use of the sonnet form itself is a kind of irony too. Maybe one will want to consider his many other poems that are written as sonnets and ask what use he has made of this old form which could have a bearing on his practice here. Among other possibilities, could the form and the tone taken together possibly be an example of the kind of pretending that Dunbar had in mind when he wrote his famous poem titled "We Wear the Mask"? While one is making comparisons to his other poems, it might also be useful to keep in mind that McKay was not a native American. His experiences with extreme racial violence came only with his arrival in the States from his native Jamaica, so for him a lynch poem was more than a stock exercise of the sort that occupied almost all black poets in this country a generation or more ago. Moreover, in this

regard one might also care to think about the alliterative language again, for "lads" would have been entirely acceptable in the speech of one who was a Jamaican before he became an American.

How necessary is it for one either to raise or to answer all of these questions? Not necessary at all, just useful. These are not only esthetic investigations. The issue is the larger one that John Ciardi phrased so succintly a decade ago in the title of his poetry anthology, How Does a Poem Mean?

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The third example is not a poem but part of a story in Richard Wright's early collection called Uncle Tom's Children, the story titled "Big Boy Leaves Home."[9] This time the reader has a fuller context for the deed. Unlike the two poems, the characters here have names: Bobo, Big Boy, Buck, and Lester. The victim--Bobo--is not yet a grown man. That he has shot a white man provides reason enough for the mob to go after him, yet the white soldier's death was not planned. The gun, in fact, had already killed two in the group of black boys before it was wrenched out of his hands and fired at him. An air of youthful innocence is very much a part of the reader's awareness as he reads on toward the end of the story. He knows that the boys had been playing hookey from school and had been swimming naked in a pond--hardly an inflammatory situation until a white woman came along. He knows too that Big Boy has escaped, that he is hiding in an old cistern where he can hear the awful nightmare of the lynching

but most of the time cannot see very clearly what is happening.

In order to dramatize this physical situation the reader is allowed to sense rather than just to read the story, for Wright is very careful to limit what is reavealed about the scene. One hears the voices and the footsteps of the mob, the whistle of the north-bound train, the yelping of the dogs, the singing of the women, the scream of Big Boy's friend Bobo. He feels cold water up to his knees. He smells the stench of the hot tar. And finally he feels the gentle rain on his face.

Even as the details are outlined here, the story appears to be starkly realistic--even naturalistic. The boys act and react; they do not have an opportunity to think. The world of white rules and white terror is a fact of their reality, but they can control neither it nor themselves. All this the reader comes to understand not through author intrusion but through dialogue, especially through short and choppy bits of conversation:

"Everybody git back!"

"Look! Hes gotta finger!"

"C MON! GIT THE GALS BACK FROM THE FIRE!"

"He's got one of his ears, see?"

"Whuts the matter!"

"A woman fell out! Fainted, Ah reckon..."

Yet this is more than just a story about a lynching. Like all the rest of the collection, this shows black men and women and

children trying to endure in the face of a white antagonist who will not go away. One may wish to consider them as a different generation from Uncle Tom, for isn't the book called Uncle Tom's Children? But what has changed here? Two boys were shot. The black community is frightened but unable to act. One small cottage is burned to the ground. A third boy is mutilated and burned until he is dead. Another boy escapes to the visionary North in the hidden compartment of a truck. But in the community nothing else is different, either for the blacks or for the whites.

What then has beenthe point of it all? Like all documentary or naturalistic works of fiction, this story permits a reader to see a situation as it is. But that was not enough. As Saunders Redding has observed, "Wright put everything in to arouse an audience which he hoped would be white, as principally it was. Only rarely did he write for Negroes, and only then when he was pressed, and then only on political subjects. He reasoned that Negroes already knew the particulars of what it was to have 'uncertainty as a way of life' and 'of living within the vivid present moment and letting the meaning of that moment suffice as a rationale for life and death.' But whites did not know, so he had to tell them."[10]

A reader, a teacher, a class could stop with this, yet another gloss by James Baldwin (to parallel the one earlier for the Hill sonnet) can provoke a further response. Does this early bit of Wright fiction suffer from the same boomerang effect that the essayist speaks of in "Everybody's Protest Novel": "The 'protest' novel, so

far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ratifying that framework we believe to be so necessary. Whatever unsettling questions are raised are evanescant, titillating; remote, for this has nothing to do with us, it is safely ensconced in the social arena, where, indeed, it has nothing to do with anyone, so that finally we receive a very definite thrill of virtue from the fact that we are reading such a book at all. This report from the pit reassures us of its reality and its darkness and of our own salvation; and 'As long as such books are being published,' an American liberal once said to me, 'everything will be all right.'"[11]

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Although some teachers may prefer to pursue a similar exercise to this with more contemporary writers (one might consider a series of poems that refer to the musician -- John Coltrane, for instance[12]) or might prefer to use different lynch poems (one could compare Wright's own "Between the World and Me" to his "Big Boy Leaves Home"), all three of the examples used here merit a place in any survey of Afro-American literature according to the standards of Nick Aaron Ford. What is most important in them may in fact turn out to be sociological after all, but students of literature should never be encouraged to emphasize <u>matter</u> at the expense of <u>manner</u>. They should learn, as James Baldwin once declared, that "literature and sociology are not one and the same."[13]

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NOTES

[1]Nick Aaron Ford, "Black Literature and the Problem of Evaluation," College English, 32 (February 1971), 536-547.

[2]Ezekiel Mphahlele, interviewed in Palaver, 3 (1972), 43.

[3]Clarence Major, New Black Poetry (New York: International Publishers Company, 1969), p. 18.

[4]See James Elbert Cutler, Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States (Montclair, New Jersey: Patterson Smith, 1969), reprint of the 1905 edition; Frank Shay, Judge Lynch: His First Hundred Years (New York: Ives Washburn, 1938); Thirty Years of Lynching in the United States, 1889-1918 (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), reprinted from the NAACP issue of April 1919; Ida B. Wells-Barnett, On Lynchings: Southern Horrors, A Red Record, Mob Rule in New Orleans (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), reprinted from copies in the Howard University Library.

[5]Included in James W. Johnson, The Book of American Negro Poetry, revised edition (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969).

[6]William Flint Thrall and others, A Handbook to Literature (New York: Odyssey Press, 1962), p. 465.

[7]Quoted by Maurice Charney, "James Baldwin's Quarrel with Richard Wright," American Quarterly, 15 (1963), 65.

[8]Claude McKay, Selected Poems (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1953), p. 37.

[9]Richard Wright, "Big Boy Leaves Home," Uncle Tom's Children (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp. 17-53.

[10]Saunders Redding, "The Alien Land of Richard Wright," in Five Black Writers, ed. Donald B. Gibson (New York: New York University Press, 1970), pp. 8-9.

[11]James Baldwin, "Everybody's Protest Novel," Notes of a Native Son (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957), p. 19.

[12]See the following poems in Stephen Henderson, ed., Understanding the New Black Poetry: Black Speech and Black Music as Poetic References (New York: William Morrow, 1973): Michael Harper, "Dear John, Dear Coltrane," pp. 238-239; A.B. Spellman, "Did John's Music Kill Him?" pp. 261-262; Sonia Sanchez, "A/Coltrane/Poem," pp. 274-278; and Don L. Lee, "Don't Cry, Scream," pp. 336-340.

[13]Quoted by Irving Howe, "Black Boys and Native Sons," in Five Black Writers, p. 255.